

CLARK ASHTON SMITH

LIVE FROM AUBURN THE ELDER TAPES



11 POEMS READ
BY THE AUTHOR

Clark Ashton Smith (1893-1961) is perhaps best known as an author of the weird and the fantastic, despite the fact that his first — and greatest — love was writing poetry. His talent recognized at an early age by the renowned poet George Sterling, Smith's first poetry collection was published in 1912 to wide acclaim. Despite the financial necessity of Smith turning to fiction later on, he continued penning poetry the rest of his life.

It was in the late 1950s that Robert Elder, also a resident of Auburn, California, made home recordings of Smith reading a number of his poems. Presented here for the first time are eleven of these pieces, with an accompanying booklet featuring the texts of all the poems included on the tape.

The tape also features an audio preface by Elder, describing his introduction to Smith, and how these tapes came to be.

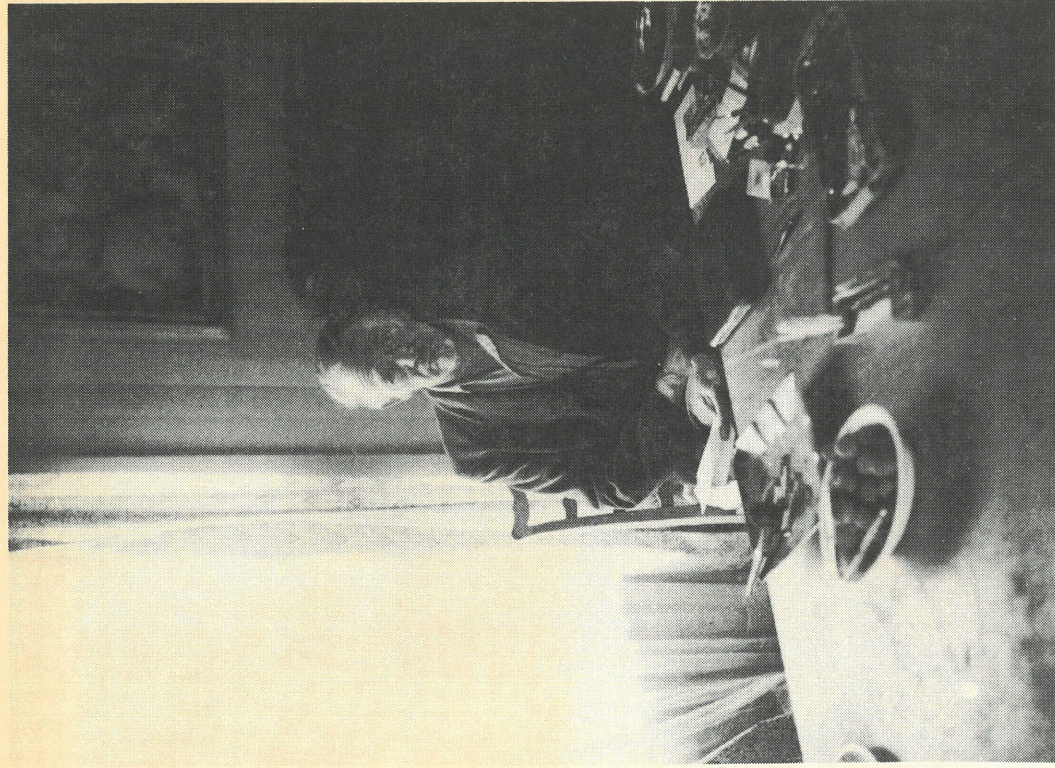
Of course, due to the age of these recordings, their sound quality cannot meet up to modern standards. Yet, the thrill they bring to the listener who, for the very first time has the opportunity to hear one of the great poets and masters of weird fiction, is indescribable. We have made every effort to restore these tapes to their original quality, and feel that this presentation of Smith's words — both in print and in his own voice — will be enjoyed immensely by all his fans.



Necronomicon Press Audio
in conjunction with A-Typical Productions
ISBN 0-940884-76-3 • \$10.95 • Book & Cassette
APPROXIMATE RUNNING TIME: 30 MINUTES

ISBN 094088476-3





Clark Ashton Smith, circa 1960

Clark Ashton Smith

Live from Auburn: *The Elder Tapes*



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The publishers would like to thank Robert B. Elder for making his tapes available to us, as well as for all of the time he has devoted to this project.

Cover art by Gahan Wilson

Necronomicon Press Audio
in conjunction with A-Typical Productions
P. O. Box 1304

West Warwick, RI 02893 USA

First Release — July 1995

Desert Dweller

There is no room in any town (he said)
To house the towering hugeness of my dream.
It straitens me to sleep in any bed

Whose foot is nearer than the night's extreme.
There is too much of solitude in crowds
For one who has been where constellations teem,

Where boulders meet with boulders, and the clouds
And hills convene; who has talked at evening
With mountains clad in many-colored shrouds.

Men pity me for the scant gold I bring:
Ungessed within my heart the solar glare
On monstrous gems that lit my journeying.

They deem the desert flowerless and bare,
Who have not seen above their heads unfold
The vast, inverted lotus of blue air;

Nor know what Hanging Gardens I behold
With half-shut eyes between the earth and moon
In topless iridescent tiers unrolled.

For them, the planted fields, their veriest boon;
For me, the verdure of inviolate grass
In far mirages vanishing at noon.

For them, the mellowed strings, the strident brass,
The cry of love, the clangor of great horns,
The thunder-burdened ways where thousands pass.

For me, the silence welling from dark urns,
From fountains past the utmost world and sun . . .

To overflow some day the desert bourns . . .

And take the sounding cities one by one.

[13 August 1937]

Malediction

While the black perennial snows
Piled about the pole of night
Swell the fount whence Lethe flows;

While the worm, apart from light,
Eats the page where magians pored;
While the kraken, blind and white,

Guards the greening books abhorred
Where the evil oghams rust—
In accurst Atlantis stored;

While beneath the seal of dust
Dead mouths mutter not in sleep
To betray oblivion's trust;

While the dusky planets keep,
Past the outlands of the sun,
Circuits of a sunless deep,

Never shall the spell be done
And the curse be lifted never
That shall find and leave you one

With forgotten things for ever.

Tired Gardener

Cherish them not,
the ostentatious roses grown with care
extravagant, the Tyrian fuchsias drooping
with heaviness of over-nurtured bloom,
and orchid-miming irises that speak too loud
of opulence and sumptuous circumstance:
cherish them not, O gardener,
knowing how soon
the desert breathes in every Babylon
and withers all things that man has tilled and trained
too often not for mere beauty's sake
but only to prove the old Mammonian power;
knowing how soon
the lovely weeds half-disinherited
return, and banished grasses break
the squares and circles of the flowery plots
and beard the creviced fountains.

Turn rather
to sand-verbenas yellow as the sun
that flourish on the crumbling dunes,
to yarrow, and the blackbird-ridden reeds
and willows following the dark sunken channel
of marsh-lost waters toward the sea.

Turn rather
where springs the pale and migniard mountain-phlox
in basins granite-rimmed,
and the dwarf alpine manzanitas
make arabesques upon the sheeted stone;
turn rather

to lichens charting upon trunk and boulder
the track of centuries unclocked:
these shall be planted, these be tended
never by swink and sweat of any laborer;

and these
shall flower the unmanned eternity of earth
when the last empire dies, a fat mandragora
uprooted by its rebel gardeners.

[5 August 1955]

High Surf

Loud as the trumpet that made the mortised walls
Of Jericho to tremble and lean and sway,
The voice of ocean sweeps this granite verge.
The cormorants today,
Back-diving through the falling walls of surge,
Float not too near the rocks;
And smoky, white-haired phantoms ride the long-spined rollers
Curving across the bay
From gulfs that round Cipango, arc Cathay.

For me,
Who stand enchanted and exalt,
Seized up into a short eternity,
No anger and no sorrow that men feign
Informs the risen main:
I hear alone the impassible roar
Of years and centuries and cycles rolling
Under the solar and galactic vault,
Over the cliffs and cities, over the mountains
From shore to crumbled shore.

Seeker

In valleys where the lotos falls
And rots by lily-stifled streams,
A sleeper, dreaming of the sea,
Shall rise, and leave the halcyon lawns,

And follow fainting trails alone
Into the waste that has no well,
Or fare on some fantasmal quest
To climes beyond the boreal snow.

For, sated with the lotos-fruit,
He craves again the vanished brine,
The sunken ships, the siren isles,
The maelstroms haunted by the mew.

Amid chimera and mirage
He plucks the acrid outland pome
And mordant herbs that make him whole,
And trails the meteor and the star

To leave his vulture-burnished bones
In lands of knightlier sleep than they
Shall haply share whose bones are laid
Where now the lotos-blossoms blow.

Don Quixote on Market Street

Riding on Rosinante where the cars
With dismal unremitting clangors pass,
And people move like curbless energumens
Rowelled by fiends of fury back and forth,
Behold! Quixote comes, in battered mail,
Armgaunt, with eyes of some keen haggard hawk
Far from his eyrie. Gazing right and left,
Over his face a lightning of disdain
Flashes, and limns the hollowness of cheeks
Bronzed by the suns of battle; and his hand
Tightens beneath its gauntlet on the lance
As if some foe had challenged him, or sight
Of unredressed wrong provoked his ire. . . .

Brave spectre, what chimera shares thy saddle,
 Pointing thee to this place? Thy tale is told,
 The high, proud legend of all causes lost—
 A quenchless torch emblazoning black ages.
 Go hence, deluded paladin: there is
 No honor here, nor glory, to be won.
 Knight of La Mancha, turn thee to the past,
 Amid its purple marches ride for aye,
 Nor tilt with thunder-driven iron mills
 That shall grind on to silence. Chivalry
 Has flown to stars unsooted by the fumes
 That have befouled these heavens, and romance
 Departing, will unfurl her oriflammes
 On towers unbuilt in an age to be.
 Waste not thy knightliness in wars unworthy,
 For time and his alastors shall destroy
 Full soon, and bring to stuffless, cloudy ruin
 All things that fret thy spirit, riding down
 This pass with pandemonian walls, this Hinnom
 Where Moloch and where Mammon herd the doomed.

Surréalist Sonnet

The lyre-bird giblets in the frying-pan
 cheep crisply to the sibilant blue gas.
 A Congo mouth gulps a blonde demitasse
 then spews on the flowered rug from Ispahan.
 Rome's red flamingo feathers wave their fan:
 while stilt-legged craw and stomach sac alas
 march down beneath aforesight's bleary morass
 bannered with mildewed naperies of man.

But brandished over stale antiquities
 still rise the verdant bones of gluttonies
 flying the parchments of new horoscopes.

The sage arachnidan from Regulus
 amid its souvenirs on raddled ropes
 will haply hand some dried oesophagus.

Hesperian Fall

The season brings but little gold,
 And only rusty gules and sanguines dull
 To these rude hills with darkling lava cored
 And with thick, sombre rocks embossed
 That yield small pasture to the mordant sun;
 And leaves of toneless brown and fawn
 Cluster the glaucous foliage of blue-oaks
 Amid the fallow grasses leonine;
 And the live-oaks' grave and winter-waiting green
 And the dim greys and dusky verdures of the pines
 Seem to turn darker with October's heat.
 In lowland and ravine
 By dwindled rill and narrowed river, willow
 And poplar and wild grape
 Will burn to purer yellows,
 To ruddier or more empurpled stains;
 And in the rows of fruit-plucked orchard trees
 Exotic pomp, deciduous splendor royal-hued
 Of other climes and orient autumns flame:
 But here the desiccate and sun-struck fells
 No similar gauds assume.

Watching the tardy portents of slow change
 Prolonged unnotably through changeless days,
 I walk in solitude
 Where memories return
 That die not with a single season's leaves
 But still delay the blind nepenthean doom,
 And gather stranger hues

Than these that clothe the tree
 Or fold the autumnal earth.
 Love walks with me, a spectre beautiful
 With fallen seasons and with suns that were,
 And on the ground our linked shadows run
 Together, and her heavy hair is blown,
 The invisible sending of a witch's web,
 On winds from off the sea
 Whose autumn shore we followed long ago;
 And ecstasy and teen
 Wild as the spray of combers reaching us
 On crags that held the perilous paths of love,
 Return to haunt these uplands calm and sere;
 And wafts of cypress-balsam, keen and sweet,
 From the sped years blow over me,
 And Lobos rises like a granite ghost
 To crown the seamless wold.

 Thus conscious and remembering,
 I move across a land
 That seems oblivion's self—
 A land whose primal languors drowse the will,
 Whose sleepy light and dim-horizoned air
 Proffer the earth's antique forgetfulness.
 But for awhile I spurn
 The peace that comes to all or rathe or late,
 And clasp the cherished pain
 As one with face amid thorned blossoms pressed
 Who finds them fragrant
 Than those that bear no thorn.
 Now, where the stones lie still
 And taciturn and secret and withdrawn
 In that dark entity we cannot share,
 And where the pines their level branches swing
 Lightly in gusts that rise and pass,
 But stir not ever from their rooted stance,
 I hear a voice that sings

Some old-world measure magical and clear,
 Or catch the glimmer of a girl's white feet
 Moving in moonlit saraband.
 O voice none other hears, that sings for me!
 Now must I muse on passions that unfold
 Slow as the lichen grows,
 Or swiftly as the fungus of the night;
 And think on how
 The many have withered but the one abides. . . .

 The shadow of a cloud
 Falls on the gnarled and boulder-buttressed oak
 Beneath whose boughs I pause,
 Noting the mistletoe
 Already pearled with wintry berries white
 'Mid leaves of mottled bronze and feuilemort.
 Haply the days draw nigh
 When dark-toothed wind and tempest will assail
 Such spare, sad splendor as these hills put on,
 And wildly strew
 Green leaves and sere together to that doom
 Which waits for all.
 Meanwhile the southward-drooping sun shines warm
 On grasses pale and foliages that fade
 And on the fadeless lichen of the stone;
 And still, O season of Circean dreams
 Preferred from long ago,
 I find a music far and sorcerous
 Like one who hears the dryad singing from her tree;
 And still, beneath this latter sun,
 Love is the freshness of your shadows, love
 The flame that in your distant azure sleeps.

Nada

This wakeful death affords not any rift
 where root of weed or blossom cleaves the tomb.
 Ungrown as yet, no yewen bowers lift,
 bringing serene misericordal gloom
 upon this sepulture adjust and bare,
 writ with a legend plain to one alone
 whose voice could quicken the unvital air,
 recalling Lazarus from his room of stone.

Oblivion's river flows in other lands
 than this where memory feeds a mordant spring:
 the walking dead beseech with parching hands
 the cool, far shadow of the raven's wing;
 and, leaning from the mouldered bed of lust,
 love's skeleton writes Nada in the dust.

[23 June 1952]

Ecclesiastes

From the French of Leconte de Lisle

Better a living dog (the Preacher said)
 Than a dead lion. All things are shadow, save
 To eat and drink. And the everlasting grave
 With life's ephemeral nothingness is fed.

So mused he, sitting alone and somberly
 On the high tower with eyes that roamed afar
 As from a headland over world and star,
 In the ancient nights, on his chair of ivory.

Old lover of the sun, who sorrowed thus,
 Death too is but illusion, cheating us.

Happy is he, at one step freed of strife.

Always I hear, with frightened ears attending,
 Amid the frenzy and horror never-ending,
 The long, long roaring of eternal life.

[4 March 1949]

Moly

Who are ye that always wander
 Up and down and here and yonder?

—We are they that ever seek,
 Over fen and fell and peak,
 Down the desert-straitened creek,
 Through dank forests darkening wholly
 Tarns remote and melancholy,
 For the flower known as moly,
 Flower that wards the flesh and heart
 From beguileful Circe's art.

Seek no more! seek no more!
 Not on mountain, moor or shore,
 Not by noon, nor under moon,
 Blows the plant of magic boon,
 Not with eyes shall any find it
 Nor with fingers pluck and wind it:
 From the dust of limbs and heart
 Shall the roots of moly start,
 Over thy forgetful grave
 Shall the flower of moly wave.

[2 December 1943]

